

Oliver among the fae

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(The cover photograph was taken by the author on Alderley Edge, Cheshire, UK.)

Dedicated to all those who have encouraged me to write the stories of the Alderley fae.

Author's note:

This novella (about 17k words), the story of Thorn(fae) and Oliver(human), is about a relationship that was briefly mentioned in the main series, Living Fae. When they move in together, problems arise, but not the ones we or they might expect. It can probably be read as a standalone tale, as I hope I have clarified any important details about the fae world, but it does contain spoilers for the main series, because the story is intertwined with that and takes place concurrently. Since it starts and ends with New Year celebrations I thought I'd make it free on my website as a holiday gift for my readers.

This is not a chapter list you can use to navigate, just a list, for reference:

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Chapter 1: First times

Well of course I knew, at some level. The mask was too perfect to be a mask. This was a pub in Cheshire, not a royal ball or a nobleman's gathering. I was wearing a simple mask – the kind popular in Regency times, I think. It merely covered the upper half of my face, like a huge pair of sunglasses but covered in glitter. It had an elastic loop fastening it to my head. If asked, I would have claimed to be a character from the ball where Cinderella met her prince, but nobody asked. Everything else was just me.

His ears were pointed, tiny horns peeped out of his silver curls, he had six fingers on each hand, his eyes were jet black and there were beautiful black and gold wings proudly displayed through a slit in his very fitted jacket. So, too perfect. Each of these things could have an explanation but taken together they would cost the earth and be hard to remove at midnight. But it was hard to believe.

I should have known he'd try to get away at the unmasking. We had shared the countdown, raised our glasses to the new year and kissed whoever was nearest. The kiss sent shivers through me, not really of a sexual kind, more of an awareness of something other. It wasn't our first kiss of the evening, but it was definitely both the best and the worst. It promised and it threatened. I almost ran but didn't. And then we all removed our masks. Except for him.

Another guy, presumably a friend of his, all wild dark curls and similar small horns, had been tugging at his sleeve for a while but he'd ignored them. As the last chimes of Big Ben died away, he gave a sort of gasp and pulled his hand out of mine. I tried grabbing him but somehow, he slipped away, leaving a filmy glove in my hand. I got a glimpse of claws, and realised his hands had been disguised even if nothing else about him had. Maybe claws on display would have been a step too far.

The rest really was a step too far. A whole pavement, even. But it had been semi-acceptable in the context of a fancy dress party. Until it wasn't. I realised why his friend had been tugging at him; they must have intended to leave before the unmasking and he'd left it late. For me. I hoped my kisses had stirred him in the same way that his had affected me.

I followed them. Well, of course I did. I wasn't about to let him get away. But the pair went into the gents and by the time I got in there – just the time it takes to open a door – the window was open and there was no sign of them. Outside, all you could see was the darkness of the woods on the Edge. No escaping masked, or rather unmasked partygoers.

There wasn't much I could do. I hadn't come equipped with a torch and the one on my mobile wouldn't cut it in the trees out there. I'd probably end up with a broken ankle. So I went home. My parents were asleep; I imagine they'd celebrated with a glass of sherry and the fireworks on television.

I tossed and turned all night then realised I had his glove in my pocket. It might just be possible to find him on the pretext of returning it. My name's Oliver Prince, but I didn't think he was a Cinderella figure. And he hadn't really run away from me, more from the entire pub full of people, something I could understand. I wanted him to know that I wanted more. More knowledge, more time, more him.

After breakfast and after wishing my parents a happy new year, I headed off to Alderley Edge again. It was a lovely day and a walk in the woods would be pleasant. Even more pleasant if I could find my... My what? I wasn't sure what to call him; I just knew I

wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anyone before. Finding him was my new year's resolution.

The Wizard was closed, though there were signs of activity; probably the landlord clearing up after the revelry. I'd been one of the first to leave. There were a lot of people walking on the Edge and I approached a few men on their own and showed them the glove. I suppose I hoped one of them might have had a similar experience or might even be a friend of Thorn's. His name should have alerted me, too, but then it could have been a special pseudonym for the party. Most people just looked bemused or laughed at me. One thought it was a come-on, but I quickly disabused him of that notion. Another tried the glove on, but it didn't fit. Shades of Cinderella again.

I thought I saw the guy with the curls, but when I crossed a clearing to speak to him, he'd vanished. Not vanished in a puff of smoke or anything like that but hidden himself among the shrubs and hedges. There were horses in the clearing, but when I looked closer, some of them had spiral horns. Or maybe I was just seeing horns everywhere.

I came again the next day. And there he was, sitting on the huge fallen tree that confronts you almost as soon as you enter the woods.

"Looking for me?" He grinned, and suddenly I knew everything would be all right. I offered him the glove and he took it, the grin widening into a laugh.

"You knew, didn't you?" he said, and I agreed, and explained my reasoning.

"The trouble is," he said, "we're not supposed to let anyone know about us. Or we can blur their memories and I should have done, or Harlequin should." I assumed Harlequin was the one with curls. "But it's too late now. They've had time to embed themselves and I don't think we'd be able to wipe them even partially."

"I don't want my memories wiped," I pointed out.

He got up and hugged me. I returned the hug with some enthusiasm. After all, I'd been looking for him for a couple of days.

"They made me train with my unicorn all the rest of the night," he said. "I think they thought it might wipe my memories but like you, I didn't want that." He kissed me then, and we strolled around the glade, hand in hand.

We discussed ourselves, our lives, our natures. I told him I was just finishing a degree course in music and hoped to teach; that I lived with my parents who would certainly disapprove of my sexual preferences; that my colouring was a result of my father's Afro-Caribbean ancestry; that I didn't have much money, unlike some of the rest of what you might call the Cheshire set who'd been at the party. He told me he lived in a tree, albeit a comfortable one; he had a unicorn and rode the creature in the fae unicorn troop, including the wild hunt, which meant he was currently quite tired; that his people didn't disapprove of anything consensual so far as sex went, but did disapprove quite strongly of interaction with humans.

"They think if humans become aware of us, they might try to use us for their own agenda – experiments, enslavement, forced charms and spells," he said.

"Then you were taking quite a risk at The Wizard," I pointed out.

"Yes, some of us were already a bit drunk on blackberry wine before we even got to the pub," he said. "But it sounded such fun." He sounded wistful. "And then, of course," he went on, "there was you. And I was enchanted. I didn't know humans could cast spells."

I smiled. I hadn't meant to cast a spell and still wasn't sure how I'd managed it. But I'd take it anyway – he was too good to pass up. And then for some reason, my hand slipped out of his as I turned to look at something. I turned back and suddenly he wasn't there. I was startled rather than worried. Was this some supernatural thing?

After a moment or two, he was back, seemingly appearing from nowhere. He passed it off as some kind of game at first then admitted his friends had been trying to persuade him to leave me.

"I told them you were in the closet," he said, "and that you wouldn't be telling anyone about me. I told them everybody at the party had drunk enough to be totally unreliable and likely to forget what they'd seen, if anything, anyway."

"Well, they disapprove, but here you are," I said. "Did they let you come back, or did you escape them?"

"I think they sort of let me escape," he said. "Maybe they want to see just how far this will go."

We walked a little further, circling back towards the road where I'd left my bike. We arranged to meet the following evening, and our kisses were underpinned by anxiety about the reactions we might attract both from homophobic humans and anti-human fae. But we parted, and I cycled home to a late dinner my mum had left for me to microwave, leaving him to join his companions in the week-long new year wild hunt.

Chapter 2: Fallout

The next time I went to the Edge, Thorn wasn't alone. He was accompanied by a very stern looking but handsome fae with blond hair. Thorn introduced him as Yarrow.

"He's the leader of our unicorn troop," he told me, "As such he's effectively the leader of our community here. He wants to talk to you."

Fine, he could talk all he wanted. It wasn't going to change my mind about Thorn. "I think Thorn's told you," he began, "that we don't like humans knowing about us." "Yes, he's told me," I replied. "But I do know now, and I swear I won't tell anyone."

He smiled. "Well, no, you won't," he said. "We decided not to blur your memories because that would be cruel to Thorn, but we can spell you so that you can't mention us. If you try to you will find yourself automatically changing the subject. It isn't really a worry." He was still smiling. I wondered if it was true and whether I could test it without breaking my promise.

"In that case," I said, "what's the problem?"

Yarrow sighed. "We used to use severe punishments for any fae who outed our existence to humans," he said. "We used to amputate their wings and exile them."

I might have gasped. I looked at Thorn, suddenly realising that I posed a threat to him. He didn't look concerned, so I decided to remain at least slightly calm.

"We've stopped doing that," Yarrow continued. "With the spell I just told you about we don't need to be quite so careful, you see. It was only perfected recently and is quite a boon. Any ongoing relationship, friendship or more, can be managed that way. Anything more casual can be sorted with blurring. And of course, modern humans are less likely to believe anyone who tries to tell them about us. There's quite a healthy disbelief in magic nowadays. But..." he stopped and seemed to be considering his next words carefully.

"But you still don't trust me," I suggested.

"It's not quite a question of trust," he said. "What we need to know is how deeply you're committed to this friendship. Whether we need to spell or blur, you see." His eyebrows rose in an obvious question.

"I'm committed," I said. I know I was blushing although they probably couldn't tell, what with the colour of my skin and the fading light. I was embarrassed, right? We hadn't talked about the future and Thorn might just be enjoying a sort of fling. I wasn't sure. I was

only sure of my own feelings which grew stronger each time I saw him. I glanced at him and saw he looked, if anything, relieved.

"That's what Thorn says, too," said Yarrow, "in which case preventing you from talking about us will be enough." He turned to go but I stopped him, placing a hand on his arm.

"Why can't you just trust me?" I asked. "I have promised never to talk about you and I keep my word."

"It's not that simple." He frowned. "After a while it would be all too easy for you to refer accidentally to people living on the Edge or in trees. Or to suggest that magic is real. It's better for you as well as us if you can't. That way, you don't have to worry about revealing us and neither do you have to put up with mockery and disbelief."

"Who casts this spell, when, and how often?" I was really curious by now.

"Whoever's around," was the reply. "Thorn, probably, but anyone would do. And the effects last quite a long time. Months, we think. I'll keep some kind of formal note and check when it needs to be renewed. OK?" And to my serious astonishment he pulled a mobile phone out of his pocket and was clearly entering something in a calendar. So much for magic and otherworldliness.

He looked up from his phone and turned to go. "Good luck," he called over his shoulder as he left us alone.

I felt lucky as my relationship with Thorn grew and deepened. But my luck was not to last in other respects.

It seemed a neighbour had seen me at the New Year's Eve party, kissing Thorn and at the time thought nothing of it. Just inebriated sloppiness. But then they'd seen us walking in the woods, holding hands, and clearly quite sober. They'd mentioned it to my parents, having no idea (I hoped) what devastation their query about my 'boyfriend' was about to wreak.

My parents are devout Christians. Not the kind who love everyone but the kind who want everyone, especially their own families, to be saved, even at the expense of their happiness. After a very loud war of words, they threw me out. Not quite literally, but most of my belongings ended up on the lawn. Fortunately, that included my violin, and Dad was almost gentle as he added it to the pile.

"Off with you." He growled, and even though there were tears in his eyes I knew he meant it. "Don't darken our doors again unless you've decided to seek forgiveness and mend your ways."

I wanted to tell him about Thorn, about the magic of the Edge, about everything, but of course I couldn't. To begin with, he wouldn't believe me, would add lying to my list of sins, then he would perhaps believe that I meant it even if it was nonsense, and that would just fuel his anger. And of course, the spell would stop me saying anything at all. Wouldn't it?

"Yes, Thorn's my boyfriend," I said. "You'd think loving parents would be happy for me, knowing I'd found someone special. But no, you have to turn it into something dark, something you find dirty. Well, if that's how you feel, I don't want to live here any more. But I'm sad." I had to explain the tears streaming down my face. "I thought you loved me. I thought I was your son for better or worse. It seems not."

I was stuffing my clothes into my suitcase. It was only a small one, the kind you can use to carry onto a plane, and it would fit on the carrier bar of my bike. But then I hadn't many clothes anyway. I fastened it into place and slung the strap of my violin case over my shoulder.

"I'll be on my way," I said. Presumably I sounded as bitter as I felt. My mother was at the door now, watching and listening but saying nothing. Did I hope as I wheeled my bike down the path that they'd call out, say they didn't mean it, that I should come back indoors?

I'm not sure. Maybe one tiny part of me did, or rather fantasised about such an outcome, but in reality, I knew they did mean it and that I was genuinely homeless.

"On your way to where?" Dad sounded sneering rather than concerned or even genuinely curious.

"Does it matter?" I didn't say any more, just closed the gate behind me and mounted the bike. I'd go to my friend Rob tonight, then after college tomorrow I'd go to Thorn. He'd take me in, wouldn't he?

Rob knew all about my sexuality. He didn't share my preferences, but he didn't judge. He just accepted me as his friend, at school and then at college. We were both studying music though I wanted to teach and he had dreams of playing in a prestigious orchestra. He not only took me in for the night, but he also fed me, and his parents were as accepting as he was. They tried hard not to criticise my folk, but I could tell it was hard for them not to say too much.

Needless to say, I couldn't get to the Edge that evening, but Thorn knew there were times I couldn't get away, especially if I'd had to stay late at college.

"What will you do?" Rob asked. "I mean, we're glad you came to us, but it isn't exactly a long-term solution." He was right. Their terrace house was a two up two down and those rooms had no space to swing the proverbial cat o'nine tails. I couldn't stay.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I'll ask around, see if anyone has room in a house share, either a rental or a squat. It might have to be a squat. I'm not exactly rich."

"You ought to see the bursar," Rob said, frowning. "I think there's emergency funding for people in your kind of situation and it probably isn't too late to get some kind of student loan that covers accommodation costs."

I hoped he was right. So far, I'd taken out a loan to cover tuition fees and travel. For everything else I'd relied on my parents who'd seemed happy to provide until their son turned out to be someone they disapproved of. It would mean going further into debt, but I wouldn't have to pay it back until I was earning a reasonable salary, and given that I intended to teach, that might be some way off.

Anyway, I did see the bursar, who was helpful, and I did put in for a loan, but I still didn't have anywhere to live. Late that afternoon I went to the Edge. It was still getting dark early but if I timed it right, we got an hour or so of dusk together before I had to cycle home while Thorn got on with what was effectively his day. All the fae were nocturnal. Thorn's face lit up when he saw me, then fell when I explained why I hadn't been the evening before.

"But where are you going to live?" he asked.

"I thought... I hoped..." I stopped but he must have sensed what I was about to say.

"Of course you can stay with me," he said. "But it will only be a temporary solution till I've consulted the rest of the community. They'll have to accept you first and they might or they might not."

"Then let's ask straight away," I said. "If it's not possible then at least I know and can look for somewhere. But I've already looked and I'm not sure I'm going to find anything. Maybe I'll end up under a bridge somewhere. Dry, at any rate."

"Come on," he said, kissing me gently. "We'll talk to Yarrow."

We went to the unicorn meadow. I'd been right when I thought there were horns on the horses there. Thorn's unicorn was a beautiful black stallion called Blackberry, and since nobody else had arrived yet he started the regular evening grooming. I watched, fascinated, and Blackberry let me stroke his velvety nose.

Eventually, Yarrow and Harlequin arrived together. Thorn had told me they were a couple, so I knew our relationship wouldn't be a problem in itself.

I gathered all my determination and approached them.

"I need to speak to you," I said. I hope I sounded confident but inside I was quaking.

Yarrow looked surprised but interested.

I started to ask but found myself stammering. Thorn was giving me encouraging looks. He thought the request might be better coming from me rather than him, but eventually he had to step in and explain that I wanted to live on the Edge.

At first Yarrow didn't believe us. He pointed out that humans don't usually live in trees.

"Your friend Micky did," said Thorn.

"But only in summer and for a holiday," Harlequin pointed out.

Yarrow was frowning. It seemed he couldn't quite understand that I might want to move in permanently, even though I explained that I knew I needed the community's permission so had come to him first, as a community leader.

"We've looked at alternatives," Thorn told him. We had discussed a variety of options while he was grooming Blackberry. "We can't really buy or rent a house, even one near here. I know there are a couple for sale or rent with trees in the gardens but two young men with no clear source of income... and anyway, I have a perfectly good tree here.

"But what's the problem with your current living arrangements?" Yarrow was still frowning.

I told them about being thrown out. "You see," I finished, "my only real choice other than this is to find somewhere to squat in the city centre, and I wouldn't be able to visit Thorn, and I'd probably have to sell my bike, and even my violin though the college would lend me one." I stammered to a halt, knowing every word I'd said was true but having no idea how the fae would see it.

Once they'd got over the shock of parents throwing their son out, they started discussing further problems. They didn't think the spell they were currently casting would cover me if I was actually living on the Edge. They'd have to renew it more frequently, maybe every morning, or I might inadvertently refer to living in a tree. Then they worried about how I'd cope in a tree in severe weather but once I'd explained what a squat might entail they stopped arguing about that.

Yarrow sighed. "It sounds very much as if need brings you rather than love," he said, but Thorn was furious. He knew I'd come to him because I loved him. Otherwise, I'd already be in a city squat or a tent. We must have convinced Yarrow because he agreed, reluctantly but still...

"Welcome to the Edge," he said, fairly formally. "Don't forget that if you change your mind we'll have to tinker with your memories."

I nodded. I wasn't about to change my mind. I hadn't known Thorn long, but it was long enough to know what I wanted. This entire situation had simply brought things to a head and rushed us into a decision we would probably have made anyway.

"Come on then," Thorn said. "I'll show you my tree. Our tree now. And we can get a meal from somebody – my breakfast and your supper." With that, he led the way to a group of beech trees clustered quite thickly together. When we stepped between the nearest ones, I knew we were immediately lost to the sight of dog walkers, mushroom gatherers, or the general strolling public. Not that there were many around at this time of day. It would soon be dark.

Chapter 3: Moving in

I was already aware, of course, of Thorn's pointed ears, horns, extra digits, and wings. And I'd met Harlequin and Yarrow. But I think I wasn't quite mentally prepared for the sight

of an entire community of fae. My own brown skin was pretty mundane when you looked at the colours they presented – green, blue, grey... Obviously some would need serious glamour before they could 'pass' as human. Harlequin, Yarrow and Thorn could get away with wearing beanies to cover their ears and horns, and mittens to disguise their hands. Not in high summer, of course, but most of the year in northern Britain. Harlequin's sister Moth was brown like me, but a sort of all-over brown with brown eyes and hair. She was captivating, as were quite a lot of the fae I saw at that first gathering. For it was indeed a gathering. While I was gawping at them, they'd come to gawp at me. Yarrow had spread the word I was to be welcome, it seemed.

Then there was the tree. It was clear I would not be able to climb it easily or fly up into the branches. But someone had unearthed the 'rope' ladder, made of ivy vines, that they'd used for the Australian visitor, Micky. At least I wasn't the first human to stay here. Just the first to want to move in permanently.

A room in a tree conjures up all sorts of ideas. Children have tree houses. Some protestors stay in trees on threatened sites. Occasionally teenagers climb easy trees and sit on sturdy branches. This wasn't quite like any of those scenarios. There was a living area made from interlaced branches with a carpet of moss. I was a bit scared to tread on it, fearing it wouldn't bear my weight, but Thorn was moving around quite happily and he's taller and heavier than me. I didn't think fae could change their size or mass, only glamour them, and surely a tree wouldn't be affected by a glamour. I hauled myself off the ladder and onto the floor to explore my new home. Our bed was a hammock, woven of ivy and coated, again, with moss. I would have to learn to get in and out with spilling either myself or my companion onto the floor. There were hooks or rather protuberances, at various points. Some supported the hammock and the rest were clearly meant to hold clothing and other belongings. Thorn cleared a couple for me, and I now had a wardrobe, of sorts. From the ground, it had been almost impossible to see the room or platform. It was artfully disguised with more branches, vines, etc. Thorn assured me that it could be hidden completely if we ever got humans walking directly below but also said that hardly ever happened and there was generally good warning.

"Besides," he said, "people tend not to look up."

I wasn't sure what my feelings about it all were. A mixture, really, of awe, excitement, trepidation, love for Thorn, and just sheer surprise.

"It's beautiful," I said.

He laughed. "Say that again when the snow falls," he said, teasingly. "But we do have feather comforters, and I'll do my best to keep you warm."

There was an upper canopy, too, woven with ivy then covered with moss and protecting our space from most rain, snow, and so on. It was all so well constructed, and Thorn told me it had been around for ages.

"It was my grandfather's tree," he said. "The whole family contributed to the building of the platform. He left it to me."

"He died, then?" I was about to say something bland about being sorry for his loss, but he continued.

"No. My grandmother died, and my grandfather decided to retreat from community life. Well, not quite. He went to the Lake District and joined a group of elderly fae who live in the mountains and rarely interact with anyone. I visited him once and checked that he had everything he needed, but he didn't seem to want frequent visits and just wished me well."

A kind of fae care home? Not quite, but it seemed the fae had all kinds of situations covered.

I was to leave my bicycle in the unicorn meadow where Blackberry would guard it. It would be hidden in the hedge and would only be there overnight. In the mornings, I'd use it to get to the station and then to college.

I had been worried about my train fares but since I'd be living rent free there shouldn't be a problem, especially with the extra loan I'd arranged. As for food, Thorn said I was welcome to join the fae for breakfast and supper, although I'd be eating breakfast at supper time and supper at breakfast from their point of view. They often cooked communally though Thorn promised he could cook quite well if we wanted some time alone. Most of their supplies were from free foraging – mushrooms, berries, nuts, and the like – or from local farms. Whatever they took, they left spells for good harvests, healthy animals, and general good luck.

"Occasionally," Thorn told me, "the wild hunt will cull an old stag then we'll all have venison, or we put an aging rabbit or two out of their misery. And some of us fish in the Bollin."

Mostly, he said, they had a vegetarian diet, with eggs from local farms, milk and milk products such as cheese and butter which the fae made from the milk they took from local cows. They did sometimes shop in Alderley Edge for staples such as flour, and he explained their complex system of payment. The fae had an attitude towards money that – well – wasn't quite what I was used to. They were scrupulously honest with individuals, such as the farmers whose eggs and milk they took, and the small shops. But they used spelled credit cards so that any losses were born by the big banks, or if they had no cash, they paid in leaves glamoured to resemble coins. These would revert to their original form within twenty-four hours, but by then someone would have crept in and replaced them with money from an ATM while the shopkeeper's back was turned. The ATM, of course, used the credit cards...

I was in awe of their cavalier attitude to money and their ability to disrespect the big financial institutions.

Everybody welcomed me. Once they had Yarrow's permission to interact with a human they were fine about my presence. I think they were a little surprised that we could manage a relationship at all. People mentioned humans living in trees and others muttered about nocturnal and diurnal lifestyles. But we weren't worried, so they stopped worrying on our behalf.

We took most of our meals with Harlequin's extended family. Unusually for the fae he had four sisters and two brothers though one of these was itching to follow Micky to Australia. Peasblossom, the oldest sister, was the main cook. Yarrow took occasional turns and so did Thorn. I have never been a good cook but I joined Moth foraging for mushrooms.

For breakfast they tended to have pancakes with all kinds of fillings or toppings, sweet or savoury. Honey was a favourite. This was, I soon realised, to be my regular supper. Their supper, which they are at my breakfast time, was normally some kind of stew followed by fruit. I would, of course, eat at midday in Manchester.

I would also be able to get things like flour from the supermarket on my way back to the Edge, so I hoped I was making myself useful. I resolved to bring a few more exotic ingredients, too. Peasblossom thought spices would be welcome and maybe some fruits that didn't grow in England – avocados, mangoes, paw paws. The fae were happy to wait till native fruits were in season so didn't want me to bring foreign grown strawberries or apples.

I had very little in the way of belongings. A change of clothing plus essential toiletries were about it other than my violin and my bicycle. As a result, there was plenty of room in our treehouse for my stuff. I soon saw that the fae were essentially minimalists. They didn't collect clutter or even extra clothing. They did sometimes create decorations from wood or the shavings of unicorn hooves, but only for special people and special occasions. They borrowed books from local libraries, DVDs and CDs too. One player sufficed for a large

group. Things like that were stored in a hollow tree and powered by some kind of carefully disguised cables attached to the local grid in such a way that the electricity companies would never work out who was using extra units. The way of life suited me – more so even than I had expected. And of course, it was all experienced with Thorn by my side.

Our relationship was growing deeper. Living together made us more, not less starry eyed. Friends at college noticed I was happier and sometimes wandering around in a dream.

"I've moved in with my boyfriend," I told them. That much was permissible information. I'd been given an address to use if needed. Anything sent to '6, The Beeches, Alderley Edge' would automatically be diverted to a post office box where I could easily pick it up. I couldn't, of course, invite anyone to visit, but once or twice Thorn got someone to spell him so that he could 'pass' and met me at the station in Manchester. That way, he got to meet a few of my friends, and they knew he was real and not a figment of my imagination.

I did want Rob to visit; he was unlikely to be put off for long. Yarrow agreed he could come but warned me that they would blur his memories afterwards. He would recall a pleasant visit, maybe with drinks and snacks, but his mind would shy away from the location other than knowing it was in Alderley Edge. We were relieved at Yarrow's decision. It would be hard to be cut off from everyone.

I told Rob to meet us at The Wizard one evening and then come back to what I called the flat. He got on well with Thorn. Thorn was becoming an expert in musical education having observed me practising my violin and he was able to ask Rob sensible questions about his course. We gave him blackberry wine which he would probably remember as cider, and shortbread biscuits decorated with hazelnuts. Yarrow and Harlequin called at our tree. They didn't bother with disguise. Thorn had, because of The Wizard, but if Rob's memories were to be messed with then he would hopefully just remember some good friends. He'd be able to report to his parents and to our college friends that I seemed comfortable and that my boyfriend was both attentive and interesting. We all walked him back to the pub where he had left his father's car which he'd borrowed for the evening. Yarrow muttered some incantations of some kind, and we waved him off before heading back into the trees.

The next day, at college, I was relieved to hear him describing my 'flat' as small but pleasant, and my boyfriend as a 'good fellow'. No mention of treehouses, horns, wings, whatever.

"He seems quite well off," I heard Rob say. "Apparently he inherited his flat from his grandfather so of course he doesn't have any rent to worry about."

"Odd name, Thorn," said one of our friends.

"I think his surname's Thornton, like the chocolates. No idea what his first name is but nobody seems to use it. I met a couple of their friends, too. I'm relieved Oliver has fallen on his feet."

"As long as it lasts."

"They seem pretty settled and happy."

I was. Settled and happy. Thorn was perfect for me. Magical where I was mundane, gentle and yet wild. I knew perfectly well that Thorn was simply his name. The fae didn't seem to use surnames, and most of their names were related to plants though Flame, Harlequin's mother, had named her brood after the fae in Midsummer Night's dream plus the characters in the Commedia dell'arte. Nothing if not unusual, Harlequin's mother.

"What does he do, this Thorn?" That was Ian again, still curious. I suppose he thought he was looking out for me. He didn't need to but then as a friend he had a right to find that out for himself.

"Something in IT." Rob sounded unsure and turned to me as I came up to the group. "They want to know what Thorn does for a living," he told me. "I said something in IT but maybe you know more."

"Something in IT sounds about right," I said. "He works from home most of the time and I have no idea what it's all about. As soon as he starts explaining I kind of glaze over and it all flows over my head."

"And off into cyberspace." Ian laughed.

"Precisely." I laughed too. We had agreed, Thorn and I, that IT was sufficiently esoteric for me to deny all detailed knowledge. It would explain his apparent affluence, and it wasn't altogether untrue though he worked with fae magic rather than the human kind.

"What about your music?" Another friend, Jim, was also curious.

"I'm not sure whether he likes it," I said. "He lets me practise at home and never says anything, but..."

"That could just be love." It was Rob who spoke, but they all laughed. "You didn't have any music on last night. Do you listen to anything?"

"Yes, and he has quite eclectic tastes," I said. We, the whole group, frequently listened to CDs borrowed from the library. If anyone heard music in the woods, they would hopefully blame teenagers with loud players and a cavalier attitude to headphones.

Before anyone could ask any more probing questions it was time for a lecture and we filed into the lecture theatre, jostling each other to get the best seats. Some people liked to be virtually invisible to the lecturer so that they could catch up on sleep. Others liked to be where they might catch the lecturer's eye when question time came. I was one of the latter. I enjoyed my studies, the practical aspects of music making, the theory of education, everything.

And so it went on. I was able to deflect my friends' questions without giving anything away. And at the end of the day, I could go home to Thorn and our tree.

Chapter 4: Changes

Making love in a swaying hammock lined with soft moss while summer rain pattered on the canopy above was beyond wonderful. There was no need for magic to enhance my sensations. Thorn was enough on his own. I was getting used to living in a tree, to waking up with my fae lover beside me. He came to bed early by his standards so that he could be there for me. And I stayed up late at night for him. We managed the nocturnal-diurnal divide without really talking about it. Any slight inconvenience was worth it for both of us.

Rain, however, was more than an inconvenience and one day I was soaked by the time I reached the station and then totally failed to dry off on the train. I must have been a bedraggled sight when I finally met with Rob and the others. Our course was finished and in theory we were on holiday but today was the day for our results so there we all were, the others damp and me dripping.

I graduated. With honours. Of course I did. Not to boast, but I knew I had natural talent, and I also knew I'd worked really hard. Now I was qualified both as a musician and as a teacher. Finding a job would be the next step but I'd already sent off some applications. All, naturally, in the Alderley Edge area. Rob did well, too, and had had some interest from a couple of provincial orchestras. We were pleased with ourselves and we would celebrate.

I messaged Thorn, telling him I'd be late home. He wouldn't see my text till he got up in the late afternoon, but he wouldn't worry and he would understand.

We went for a meal, our whole group. An Indian lunch. Everyone had had good results, and we were a boisterous but happy crowd. Nobody had brought instruments with them today, so there wasn't the usual problem of where to park violins, saxophones, cellos, safely. I had left my bike locked up in Alderley and had walked to college from Piccadilly, so

we had no problems with that, either. In the afternoon we got the tram to Salford Quays, harmonising in a rendering of Matchstalk Men to the amusement and amazement of other passengers. We spent time admiring art then spilled out onto the paved area beside the water. The rain had stopped and I was dry by now, so like the others I enjoyed the sunshine, the ice cream, the iced coffees, and the general ambience. We all agreed that the War Museum was unsuitable for such a day, and we went, eventually, back into Manchester to find somewhere to do some serious drinking.

I wasn't really drunk when I got back to the Edge, just nicely mellow and still, I suspect, shining with unalloyed pleasure. I knew Thorn would congratulate me – well, he already had by text – and if my parents neither knew nor cared that was, I decided, their problem rather than mine.

I got congratulatory kisses as soon as I'd put the bike in its customary place in the unicorn meadow. Not just from Thorn. Slobbery kisses from Blackberry, too, who whinnied approval. Then when we went to the clearing where most people ate, I found they'd prepared a feast in my honour.

There was a rich stew, crammed with mushrooms and redolent of wild garlic. There were tiny cakes, frosted with sugar and topped with dried berries. And there was drink. Blackberry wine, crab apple cider, honey mead, and a cocktail of some description that Peaseblossom said was safe for the younger ones. I had no idea what was in it but after a few of the other drinks I thought it might be safer for me, too. It tasted smoky but sweet, with a green flavour to it that I thought might suggest grass. There were bubbles rising gently, all colours of the rainbow. I don't think it was very alcoholic, but it was certainly wonderful – at once refreshing and calming. I might have drunk quite a lot.

"Now that you're a real teacher," said Moth, once she'd managed to snag my attention, "can you teach some of us to play musical instruments?"

"Of course," I said, surprised. I had vaguely assumed that fae didn't need to be taught anything, that it all came naturally.

"I'll remind you tomorrow when you're sober," she said, and Thorn laughed as he led me off to our tree.

"You won't escape," he told me. "She's determined our youngsters should be the best educated fae in the northwest of England, and music is definitely on the curriculum."

"I just hope I'll be the one to teach some of the human young around here, too," I said. I gather I slurred it rather than said it, and Thorn just grinned and put me to bed.

He came to my graduation ceremony. Well, of course he did. Somebody, probably Yarrow, glamoured him so that his horns and pointed ears didn't show and so that anyone trying to count his fingers would get distracted and have to start again. Once upon a time I would have expected my parents to attend, full of pride at their son gaining a degree, but on reflection I preferred the pride that glowed on Thorn's face.

He clapped and cheered with the rest of the audience as we filed up to receive our certificates and shake hands with the dignitary awarding them.

Afterwards, Rob, who'd been given an incredibly expensive new smartphone by his beaming parents, took all our photographs, as a group, singly, and with our families or particular friends. Better than the official photographer, who would insist on adjusting our hoods and caps, and would cost the earth.

On the way back to the Edge I called at the post office. I was getting antsy about my job applications. There was a letter and it invited me to attend for interview. The school, a comprehensive, was nearby and I hoped and hoped they would like me.

They did. I would start in September and the first day was a 'teacher training day' when I'd meet my colleagues and get used to the layout of the place. Everything was coming together nicely. I'd even be able to use the school piano for practice. It was one thing carting a violin to the Edge and back, but a keyboard on a bicycle is not really something anyone wants, so I'd been relying on the pianos at college. Piano, violin, and conducting – those were my major skills, and I looked forward to sharing them with teenagers.

As far as the fae were concerned, violin and conducting would have to do. Moth encouraged anyone interested to turn up for weekly sessions with whatever instruments they could come up with. Some fashioned their own, carving wood and polishing it, using ivory from unicorn hooves, and string made from plant material. Some searched in charity shops but finds were rare. Vervain used an enchanted credit card to buy a French horn, and we all admired both the horn itself and his determination to master it.

I started with what I thought might be relevant pieces, mostly rewritten and simplified so that they could feel a sense of achievement. They liked Grieg's Hall of the Mountain King and said it made them think of Tara. Debussy's Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune was popular as was Tchaicovsky's Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. So was Schubert's March of the Gnomes though as Moth pointed out, gnomes were probably mythical and nobody needed special protection while dancing. Especially from goblins who were more likely to join in. We went on to film themes that suggested magical activities and soon my little orchestra had quite a repertoire of pieces and not a few budding musicians in the group. Their enthusiasm and willingness to practise were inspiring.

The same could not be said of the human teenagers when I met them. Some had chosen music as what they thought would be an easy option, as opposed, for example, to physics. Some had been coerced by parents who wanted their children to be prodigies, whatever their actual capabilities. Only a few were seriously interested and to maintain my sanity I had to concentrate on those. My colleagues said it was the same with most subjects, even the ones required for university entrance.

The senior staff, too, seemed to look down on what they described as 'soft options' though how anyone could think hours of practice to perfect playing a complicated piece could be a soft option was beyond me. The drama and art teachers shared my regular moans.

I was determined to get at least a small group ready to deliver a Christmas concert. I wanted to increase the confidence of the ones who wanted to shine, to please the parents, and to make myself useful in the eyes of at least the head. At any rate the school had plenty of instruments for loan, and plenty of practice space. Some children brought their own, usually expensive, instruments, often well beyond their current abilities, and I wanted to nurture them so that their parents would consider the money well spent.

I chose pieces that were easy but spectacular: film themes again, of course, because these might appeal to teenage tastes; Christmas carols, suitable for the concert's timing; a couple of current popular songs, adapted for orchestra and simplified for my little troupe. Popular music is not as easy as it sounds, but we could make it sound good, I hoped.

I was now a teacher most of the time. A fairly happy one, despite the problems of getting teenagers – the human variety – to appreciate the idea that practice makes perfect. Although my work with the fae group was an extension of my work when I got home, it uplifted me, and I loved it. Thorn came to listen when he'd groomed Blackberry, but he showed no interest in joining in. That was fine, so long as he was supportive. The unicorn riders had very little time to spare. Grooming, training, extra things like dressage, these were the order of their day. Vervain was an exception and his horn practice was paying off. We all met at mealtimes, of course. Sometimes I was up till midnight, marking schoolwork or preparing for the next day's lessons. Doing my own violin practice, too because I did my

piano practice at school. Then I would share their lunch as my midnight feast before falling into our hammock and rocking to sleep.

I was finding I was quite well off, as well. Teachers don't earn a huge salary at first, but I had few outgoings, so I was able to save. No rent, very little food shopping, no subscriptions to anything. The school was close enough that I could cycle the whole way though I suspect Thorn would have underwritten a season ticket on a bespelled card if I'd needed it. My mobile was my main expense but soon I found I was able to afford a car, something that would be a luxury in the middle of winter. I could, Thorn assured me, park it in the visitor car park run by the National Trust.

"We can glamour it at night," he said. "They'll just look past it, and nobody will wonder why it's there every evening. You'll be gone in the morning before anyone arrives."

The fae seem to use the terms 'spell' and 'glamour' to mean the same thing at times and I'm never sure which they're employing. As long as it works.

And so, I found myself the proud owner of a second-hand Toyota. I was soon in love with my car – it got me to and from work warm and dry, with no mud from passing vehicles on my trousers. I sold the bike – no need to clutter up the hedge with something I wouldn't use.

The Christmas concert went without a hitch, and the head actually complimented me. Life was good. But I should have known it was too good to last.

Chapter 5: Problems

I suppose if anyone had asked me what problems were likely to arise in my life immediately after college I might have thought of things to do with the fae, with living in a tree, or with my personal relationship with Thorn. In fact, all those were fine. It was work that produced the flies in the ointment of life.

It wasn't just the lack of respect from both pupils and senior staff. After all, the other teachers of various arts subjects suffered in exactly the same way, and it gave us something to grumble about in the staffroom at lunchtime. It sort of went with the territory and I was, most of the time, able to ignore it.

But I couldn't ignore the complaint that landed in my second term, just after Christmas. I was tired – Thorn had been busy with the New Year wild hunt and had been tired himself. Our lovemaking had taken place in a morning frenzy but neither of us complained about that. We knew there would be times when one or both of us would be frantic with work. Nor was the problem the mock exams that would take place early in the year.

The head called me to his office during my free period on Monday morning. I had been intending to do some much-needed piano practice but clearly that would have to wait till home time. Mr Jackson looked sombre.

"We've had a complaint," he began. My mind went to pushing kids to excel either for the concert or the mocks, but no.

"It's Evie Smith in the lower sixth," he continued. I was only vaguely aware of the name and then only because I had to mark the register of attendance at classes and practice sessions – we were very thorough about knowing who was on the premises in case of any disasters. I thought she might be a lowly member of the school orchestra but wasn't sure. After all, I'd only been there a few months, and I dealt with literally hundreds of kids every week.

My frown must have alerted him to my lack of any real knowledge of Evie. "The thing is," he went on, almost apologetically, "her mother has been to see me."

- "And?" It was all I could think of to say.
- "She says you groped her."
- "She what?"
- "Says you groped her."
- "Whoever she is, I most certainly didn't," I said.
- "She plays the cello in the orchestra," Mr Jackson told me, obviously realising I had little or no idea who we were talking about.

I frowned even more. "Sometimes I have to show students how to hold their instrument correctly," I suggested. "It's clear what I'm doing and why, and it's in front of the whole group."

"All the same." He sighed. "I have to investigate. And that means taking her complaint seriously. Staff-student relationships are taboo, as you know, and any hint of impropriety is treated with the full force of disciplinary procedure."

"Fine," I said, "but I'm innocent."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"You're young, not that much older than the sixth formers, and you're quite good looking. You might have misinterpreted some signal from Evie or thought you could get away with some action that she in turn would misinterpret."

I stared at him. "Hardly," I said. "I'm gay. If one of the boys had complained I might have looked back at my conduct to see what could have been misconstrued, but a girl?"

The headmaster went red in the face and spluttered.

"That could be just a good excuse," he said eventually.

I stared some more.

"How do we know you're gay?" he asked, suspicion coating his words.

"I live with my boyfriend," I began, but he interrupted.

"A boyfriend nobody has met and who has conveniently entered the conversation just now."

"He isn't a convenience." I was angry now and didn't much care that it showed in my voice. "I can bring him to meet you if you really think that's necessary, but I'm not aware that you need to meet all the partners of all the staff."

"He didn't come to the staff Christmas party."

"And if you cast your mind back, you'll remember I didn't attend either. We had something else planned for that evening."

"All the same, I need something concrete to tell Mrs Smith. She's threatening to go to the Board of Governors. Or the police."

The last thing I needed was the police. If it turned out that Thorn was a kind of alibi, well, getting the fae noticed by the authorities was probably the death knell for both my living arrangements and my relationship. The Board of Governors might, I thought gloomily, tell the police anyway.

"Look," I said, "can't you just tell the Smiths I'm gay and that I wouldn't grope the Smith girl under any circumstances, and ask if I showed her how to hold her cello, and..."

"I probably could," Mr Jackson interrupted. "But there's a further problem. Mr Smith is on the Board of Governors and furthermore, he's something high up in the police though I've forgotten his rank. I gather Evie and her mother haven't told him anything yet, but if they do, well, I'm afraid he'll be so enraged at the thought of anyone molesting his darling daughter that he won't look at evidence or listen to reason."

All of a sudden, it seemed my life, my nice cosy life, was in tatters, all due to some stupid girl who had accused me of something I not only hadn't done but wouldn't dream of doing.

"We could ask Evie to meet with you, with her mother, of course, and discuss the matter. That's about the best I can do." The head sounded almost apologetic.

"I suppose it won't make things any worse," I said. The meeting was promptly arranged for the next day after school.

I told Thorn all about it when I got home and admit to ending up in tears, which led to a really good session of comfort a.k.a sex.

"I can come and meet your Mr Jackson if you think it would help," said Thorn. "But I can't see how it would. I mean, short of making love in front of him there's really no way of proving I'm your boyfriend and not just a housemate trying to provide support."

"But what if they tell Evie's father? What if the police get involved?"

"All the more reason I should probably stay out of it," said Thorn.

We brought Yarrow and Harlequin into the discussion, and they agreed with my lover.

"I knew you were trouble," said Harlequin, grinning, "but I must say this isn't the kind of trouble I expected."

"Whatever happens, you can't let the police know about us," said Yarrow.

"What if they want to visit my home?" I was thinking of more and more worst-case scenarios, each scarier than the last.

"Then you say your boyfriend has finished with you and you're temporarily staying with Rob." Yarrow was quite firm about it. He didn't go as far as saying Thorn should finish with me, but I could see he was considering the idea.

That opened another can of worms. I'd have to tell Rob about the whole sorry mess, and although he knew about my sexual preferences his parents didn't. They knew my own parents had thrown me out but not why. They assumed it was something to do with my family's deeply religious beliefs which they knew I didn't share. I phoned Rob.

Rob was sympathetic. But he could also see a lot of extra problems if I moved into his house, even on a short-term basis. He could also see that I didn't want to involve Thorn in the issue – I claimed this was something deeply upsetting to Thorn and didn't elaborate - and why I was asking for help.

"But you must see this isn't the answer," he said. "And if you tell Mr Jackson your boyfriend is no longer your boyfriend he will probably believe he never was in the first place. Let me think."

The thinking led to a convoluted plan. Rob was now playing with a regional orchestra, and they were rehearsing for a concert in Chester. He knew one of the timpanists was gay and single and was also an amateur actor as well as a musician. Maybe Peter would be willing to put me up in his flat and pretend to be my boyfriend. It would need a change of address for me, but I could just say we'd moved because of the rent. I hadn't mentioned the 'flat' being Thorn's grandfather's at school. It would also, of course, need Peter being willing to do this for a total stranger.

He was. The phone lines were busy, and it was all arranged in a hurry, but I now had an address in Wilmslow and a new official boyfriend. Thorn was jealous but knew it had to work. Peter, when he spoke to me on the phone, said he'd do it for the sake of any other gay man and that he hoped I could convince the school and the family that they were wrong. Round about midnight I took myself and a few clothes and my violin to Peter's flat and collapsed into his spare bed. That way I was familiar with the flat and could hopefully make people believe my story.

The next morning I 'remembered' to tell the school secretary that I'd moved.

The day went past in a blur. Peter had provided some cereal for breakfast, and I had a school lunch, but I felt sick. I felt violated, too. I was horrified that someone had accused me of this behaviour in particular.

When I finally reached Mr Jackson's office at what should have been home time, I only vaguely recognised Evie. She was, I supposed, quite a pretty girl, but I didn't really notice girls much. She took after her mother, who seemed very composed and had her lips compressed in a thin line that suggested anger and perhaps contempt.

"So, this is the creep who assaulted you," she began, not even introducing herself. "I'm not surprised. His sort always try to get away with things."

"He was only showing me how to hold my cello," Evie muttered. So, Evie was not the source of the complaint. Her mother was. Strange.

Mr Jackson tried to rescue a hopeless situation by introducing us properly then told Mrs Smith that I would not have groped Evie because I was gay.

"Gay as well." She sniffed. "I don't believe a word of it, but then people like that lie all the time."

I was beginning to recognise the coded messages in her words. You don't live all your life with both overt and covert racism without knowing what people really mean. Mr Jackson, however, had no idea.

"People like what?" he asked. "Music teachers?"

"Of course not." Mrs Smith looked offended. "Evie's first music teacher was a lovely lady."

"Then what exactly do you mean?" The head was beginning to sense a hidden agenda but hadn't quite worked out what it was.

"His sort. You know. I spotted him at the Christmas concert and knew his sort at once. He should never have been employed here in the first place. And when Evie said he'd touched her, well, I knew we had to make an example of him."

I broke in. "It isn't possible to correct the handling of a cello with touching," I said.

"And I don't understand," said Mr Jackson, almost as if I hadn't spoken, "since the concert was organised by Mr Prince. I thought it went very well, and was pleased, since he's a new member of staff and in his first post."

"Which should never have been in a school like this," said Mrs Smith, with an air of triumph. "You really should make sure all your staff are British, you know. It isn't as if this is a multicultural area."

"I'm British," I told her. "I was born in Manchester and have lived in the south Manchester area all my life. I have a Brit passport if it matters." Obviously it wouldn't matter to her.

"Rubbish," she said, almost spitting. "You should go back where you came from." Light dawned on Mr Jackson and I almost felt sorry for him.

"I think you're allowing your prejudices to overrule your reason," he said, fairly sharply. "We don't encourage that kind of thinking here."

Mrs Smith gobbled and muttered and went very red in the face. Evie went red, too, out of sheer embarrassment. The poor child must have mentioned her new way of holding her cello and then unwittingly unleashed all this.

"And unfounded accusations based on prejudice could be seen as a kind of hate crime," Mr Jackson continued. Inwardly, I cheered. At least my boss was supportive when it came to my race. "I do hope you won't be involving your husband as I believe he's somewhat on the side of law and order."

Finally, Evie spoke up, perhaps realising that for once her mother was outnumbered.

"I won't say he touched me inappropriately, Mum," she said. "Because he didn't. He's a good teacher and you're making things really difficult for him."

Mrs Smith collected her handbag and her coat then stood up and grabbed Evie's hand.

"Come along," she said. "You'll be hearing from me, Mr Jackson. I shall make sure Evie changes her subjects so that she doesn't have to have this person teaching her. She can have private music lessons. We can afford it."

Evie followed her mother to the door, her face showing me a wordless apology.

When they'd gone, the head groaned.

"I never thought of that angle," he said.

"Nor did I," I told him. "I had this stupid idea that education was a safe space."

"I don't think she'll be back," he said. "And I don't think she'll say anything to her husband. She'll pass off the subject change with some silly lies, and Evie won't correct her in case it all comes out."

"So that's it?" I asked.

"It is," he said. "But I would still like to meet your boyfriend."

"I'll arrange it," I said, smiling. But the new problem was, Thorn or Peter?

Chapter 6: Meetings and celebrations

There was, of course, no question in my own mind, but there was definitely a question of who to introduce to Mr Jackson.

I put the question to Thorn, and to Yarrow. They were firmly of the opinion that there was no need to confuse things further. Provided Peter was willing to let me use his address for the time being, Thorn was my boyfriend. Someone would bespell him so that he could 'pass' when he met my boss.

He came to pick me up from school one afternoon, giving the excuse that we were going straight on somewhere. He lingered near the secretary's desk in the main lobby, and I knocked on the head's door.

"You wanted to meet my boyfriend," I said. "He's here at the moment."

Mr Jackson shook Thorn's hand, and I hoped he didn't count the fingers. They were spelled to be five rather than six, but I wasn't sure if that only applied to sight rather than touch. They chatted for a moment, about football of all things. I hadn't realised the head was such a Manchester City supporter nor that my lover had any idea about human sport. Still, whatever helped.

"You weren't able to come to the staff party." Mr Jackson sounded a little accusing.

"No," Thorn agreed. "I had a party of my own to attend and Oliver came with me to that. It's a pity when these things clash. Maybe next year."

"What is it you do?"

"I work in IT. I work mostly from home, but we do have company events from time to time." Thorn carefully didn't give any more details and to my relief, at that moment the phone rang, and the secretary called the head to speak to a worried parent.

"So," I said as we headed home, "we've established that you aren't a figment of my imagination, and that for some reason you're suddenly an expert on football." I grinned and Thorn grinned back.

"We try to stay abreast of current popular human culture," he said. "It helps to sound genuine when we shop, for example."

"It must be easier nowadays with smart phones," I said, and he nodded.

"But before we had those, it wasn't always necessary to sound well informed," he pointed out.

I pondered the oddness of the fae community making sure they were all aware of sports news, pop culture, royal gossip, and local news. Perhaps one or two made it their business to keep up to date and share their findings with the others.

They were, I'd discovered, a motley bunch.

At first, I'd thought Peasblossom's partner Mal was human like me. No horns, normal ears, five fingers... Then I'd realised the wolf who sometimes slept at the foot of the tree was in fact Mal in his other form. Then of course there were the cubs. Mal could control his shifts and did. For the little ones it was another matter and shapeshifting toddlers must be a parent's worst nightmare. However, they were growing up bright, interesting, and kind. May and Mab were both quite musical and Mal had bought them flutes. They were a pleasure to teach, even at quite an early age. The boys weren't musical but they made up for it by being as bright as buttons.

Blessing, the goblin unicorn rider, looked for all the world as if made from tree bark. He was shorter than most of the fae and stood out, especially mounted on his lovely unicorn, Disguise.

Delver, an Irish leprechaun, moved into the foot of Yarrow's tree, and not long after my school problems somehow managed to solve the problem of Nanna, a rather unpleasant fae who had been upsetting some of the younger ones in particular. I wished he could have solved my school problems, but a leprechaun was probably a step too far, and besides, the problems had resolved themselves.

Then there was Ferdy. The fox fairy was quite spectacular with his auburn colouring and his magnificent bushy tail. He and Starling, the unicorn master, were in some kind of loose foursome with Yarrow and Harlequin. I didn't ask for details but noted that at some point that summer the foursome turned into two twosomes which seemed to me to be somewhat less confusing all round for everybody, not least the four of them.

At the beginning of summer Cobweb, Harlequin's younger brother, left the Edge permanently to spend his life with the Australian human Micky. The one they'd referred to when I was asking to live on the Edge. So Thorn wasn't alone in his preferences.

Meanwhile, Moth took over teaching duties from Harlequin. The twins, their youngest siblings, were now about twelve, and there was Cocklebur, Harlequin's nephew, whose mother was Columbine. There were also the four wolf-fae cubs and a few other assorted children including a couple of goblins who had expressed a desire for education.

Also, that summer, Amanita, a female leprechaun, joined Delver, and soon became Peasblossom's second in command in the cooking department. Together they rivalled the best chefs and we feasted regularly.

To my perpetual amazement we had at least five kinds of paranormal creatures: fae; goblins; leprechauns; shape shifters and unicorns. And not to mention various visitors such as Eichhorn the Elfe from Germany and the cat fairies from Tara. Plus me but there's nothing paranormal about me. As I said, a motley crew.

They had all been startled and puzzled by my school problem. The fae and the others don't seem to notice things like skin colour or gender preferences. I suppose you could call them a truly multicultural community. They have their likes, dislikes, and personal prejudices, of course, but in general their only worry is humans. And that's based in a fear of being used, misused, abused – a very real fear, and almost certainly justified.

I spent the summer on tenterhooks. A teacher's first year is a kind of probationary period, and I was nervous about how the accusation against me would look on my record. I needn't have worried. Mr Jackson was not only generally pleased with my work, but also

thoroughly annoyed that a parent had wasted his time with a prejudiced complaint. I suspect it made him more kindly disposed towards me than less.

We kept in touch with Peter. I needed to check in with him from time to time in case school wrote to me at his address. My confirmation that I'd successfully completed my probationary year came there, for instance. He was friendly and didn't mind the occasional slight inconvenience. I introduced Thorn though he came glamoured and passed as human. As with Mr Jackson he talked about things like football but also knew he was chatting to a musician so aired his knowledge of music. That was, I discovered, quite extensive, though my lover had never had any urge to play an instrument himself.

"Do you have any favourites?" I asked him on the way back to the Edge.

He thought for a moment. "I think we all like the incidental music to Midsummer Night's Dream by Mendelssohn," he said at last. "You know, Flame named some of her children after the fairies in that. And Shakespeare certainly knew we were basically human-sized, not the abominable miniatures the Victorians managed to popularise. He didn't get the horns and claws, though." He paused then went on, "Maybe he thought they would be too much work for the wardrobe people."

"I'll bear that music in mind," I said, glad to have something to build into a proper repertoire for my little orchestra. I would simplify the music and change the keys to make it suit their instruments and skills. It would definitely keep me busy.

That Christmas we went to the school staff party. Thorn came across as pleasant but unmemorable. He was glamoured to pass as human and fitted well into the group of husbands, wives, boyfriends, and girlfriends. And yes, there were other gay staff, I discovered, though none of them had run across the Smiths. But then, none of them were ethnic minority. The only other teachers with brown skin like me were Luke Thomas who taught physics to the upper forms and had not met Evie who was following an arts course, and Anita Singh, who only taught the younger ones and had started just the year before me, so had also not had anything to do with Evie. I gathered Mr Jackson had warned them both about what had happened – any teacher might be called on to cover for an absent colleague, so it was as well to be forewarned. Thorn, of course, looked white British, and was average height (tall for a fae but they wouldn't know that) with nondescript colouring due to the glamour.

We also enjoyed ourselves at the solstice fair. The goblins set up a fair on Alderley Edge every solstice and equinox. I was going to describe it as an echo of things like Alton Towers or Thorpe Park, but that doesn't do it justice. There are rides, yes, and games like the ones at the county fairs of old. But the whole thing is only open at night and is lit by sparkling lanterns. The rides are crooked, though perfectly safe, and the atmosphere is magical. Thorn took me when we first met, and I was hooked, so he had to take me again every time. We would go in their morning, my late evening, and of course there would be few fae around at that time of their day so we would have some rides to ourselves. He paid, apparently, with spells and wishes. Goblins have less magical ability themselves so magic is the perfect currency. I had to go on the same rides every time: the carousel with its prancing unicorns; the big wheel that gave a view of the Edge at night; the huge swing that took us swaying through the trees; the ghost train. We bought candy floss and made ourselves sticky. We tried aiming balls at ducks in a row and once we won a plush, emerald-green caterpillar that then took pride of place in our tree. It was not really like Alton Towers at all. Better, in some respects.

The goblins are not around much between festivals. They're too busy with their markets, held under various low hills. These are travelling markets and stock a lot of things fae might need: jackets with slits for wings, beanies that come low enough to cover horns and ears; mittens that hide extra fingers. Thorn warned me never to accept anything to eat that I hadn't paid for, and as I had no means of paying, I didn't. He told me about the time Harlequin had eaten an offered apple as a child, and it was an awful warning. Goblin fruit can look lovely and be quite foul. But they don't mean any harm, and they are not only admired but liked for their markets and fairs. I have no idea where they live, but not in trees. Holes in the ground? Caves? Caravans that travel between markets are more likely, I think, but maybe I'll never know.

The fairs are the main excitement of each of the four major festivals for most fae, but of course for riders like Thorn there's also the wild hunt. They scatter unwanted wildlife and protect the more acceptable kind. They also cull old, sick animals that beg for death. The unicorns seem as thrilled by the chase as their riders. At the spring equinox all fae officially age a year, and there are ring dances in which all must participate.

There were plenty of events to break up the year and I never got tired of learning more about them. I never got tired of learning more about Thorn, either. I was deeply happy at home and well settled in my job. Life was perfect. Famous last words, of course.

Chapter 7: Partings

It was plain sailing till the following summer. Then at the solstice, despite all the wonderful things like the goblin fair and the feasting, things fell apart all of a sudden.

Thorn was summoned to Tara for royal guard duty. He'd be away for six months. My first reaction was panic.

He assured me that it would all pass quickly and he'd be back with me before I'd had time to notice he was gone.

Then I suggested spending my summer holiday in Ireland though of course I'd travel by ferry from Holyhead, not in a fae coracle. Discussion with those who had already taken their turn in Tara vetoed this idea.

"No human would be welcome in Tara," said Yarrow. "Having you live here with us on the Edge is one thing. Tara is another."

"But..." I began, but Harlequin interrupted.

"He wouldn't have time to spend with you," he said. "Guards are busy most of every night and asleep most of every day. I can't think you'd enjoy having at most one hour in twenty-four of Thorn's time."

"And," said Ferdy, joining the general conversation, "if you did meet, you'd probably need to do so in secret. The puck would not approve of a guard meeting a human, even outside the palace."

Then it dawned on them the second reason for my panic.

"Don't worry," said Yarrow. "You're part of our extended family now. You're welcome to stay on the Edge, eat with us, keep your car here, and so on. During your summer holiday – I think you said six weeks – we'll keep you busy. You won't notice Thorn's gone."

I scoffed at that idea but was grateful for the way they included me as family.

"You'll take care of our tree," Thorn pointed out. "It does need maintenance, you know and that's always best done in summer. If any spells are needed, there are plenty of fae around to help."

I did know about maintaining the tree. The vines and plaited branches had to be inspected regularly, and the moss replaced where it was wearing thin. My 'rope' ladder sometimes needed reweaving, too. Occasionally, the task was one human hands could do but more often a spell was necessary. Moth was usually the one to help. Harlequin was, I gathered, the best speller of all, but was too often busy in the unicorn meadow to be of frequent assistance. He shares the role of deputy leader with Elder, Columbine's lover. Her unicorn is Wrath, who is more experienced than most of the others and for that matter than his rider. But Harlequin's Araminta is almost as magnificent as Yarrow's Devil. And by the way, while the fae are named by their parents, like humans, unicorns name themselves.

And so, my own lover set out for Ireland with his unicorn prancing and dancing at the very idea of going to Tara and being an important part of the titania's guard.

"She won't be so happy when she has to sail there," said Thorn.

I suppose they could all have gone by ferry in the human way, and taken the unicorns as horses, but it would have needed a lot of glamour and besides, it was traditional, they all said, to go by coracle.

My third line of panic was engendered by the tales I'd heard about the various affairs even Harlequin and Yarrow had indulged in during their separate times away.

Thorn was determined to reassure me.

"You know quite well I love you," he said. "A fae inviting a human to share his tree is almost unheard of, so you must know you're incredibly special. I'm not going to Tara to have fun, but to work. There are plenty of guards who never even think about romance or sex while they're there."

Harlequin sensed I was concerned.

"Don't worry," he said. "When Yarrow went, we deliberately released each other from all ideas of faithfulness. If either or both of us had made promises it would have been quite different."

"And," said Yarrow, who was listening, "when Harlequin went, well, he met Ferdy, and who could resist Ferdy?"

"Anybody," said Ferdy, who was also listening, and whose glorious tail fluffed out in mock horror. "But then Yarrow found Starling, and Starling arrived in Tara for further training, and the rest is history."

"Or magic," said Harlequin, rather dreamily. Yarrow just grinned.

We all waved goodbye to Thorn and Blackberry. He was meeting some other fae on the way to the west coast, but for now he was on his own, riding through the night on his way to royal Tara.

They were true to their word, keeping me busy. The first few weeks were not a problem, because at the end of the school year I had so much to do. There were reports to write, for a start. Then somehow, I got roped into helping with Sports Day. Someone had heard my boyfriend was absent on what they assumed was a business trip, and like the fae they were determined to keep me occupied and grounded. Then the students were all demob happy and hard to control or motivate though I did manage to get my best pupils to put on a summer concert. The holidays, however, loomed like some kind of abyss.

I needn't have worried. Yarrow insisted Thorn's tree needed a major overhaul and that took both time and thought. Peasblossom found a need for all kinds of ingredients she'd never previously mentioned. Some required sourcing from human supermarkets and others needed to be sought, sometimes with Moth's help, in the surrounding countryside. I gradually became an expert on native herbs. But Moth was the best at keeping me in line. Her pupils did not have a summer holiday.

"We have our longest break in the winter, to coincide with seriously bad weather," she explained. Fae other than the unicorn riders hibernate when temperatures drop really low.

So, her lessons continued and she assigned me the role of second in command in her classroom.

I found myself teaching things I hadn't really thought about. I knew some history, mainly the history of music, but that in itself was interesting to my fae and goblin pupils. Then there was maths, which as a musician I found relatively easy. And on top of those, there was, of course, music itself, and finally there were expeditions to the human world.

We took some of them to concerts, glamoured, of course. The goblin kids were put out that they couldn't join us, but glamour was never going to get anyone to believe they weren't small children. Even fae magic can only work with what's there to begin with. However, I was by now expert at wrangling disgruntled teens, and they soon calmed down. The fae children experienced classical concerts and rock gigs. Everybody went to an outdoor concert in the grounds of Gawsworth Hall near Macclesfield. The event was in the early evening so in the fae morning, and we made it seem like a big family picnic. Mal and Peasblossom came with us to reinforce the idea. Moth and Peasblossom were, of course, responsible for disguising the children, and even the cubs behaved impeccably. The goblin children seemed unreasonably excited but then they hadn't had many treats so far.

We took some of our pupils in small groups to explore various historical sites such as the walls (and the Rows) of Chester, and one or two castles in the area.

Once we went to Manchester airport and watched the planes taking off. We took the goblin youngsters on that outing. The children needed to know as much as possible about the human world that surrounded their own. Besides, fae can't fly over salt water and need to use planes for long distance travel. Or coracles, of course, in the case of Tara.

As well as hopefully adding to their education I was learning a great deal myself. The fae were a fascinating community and culture, and one I was becoming submerged in. I would never be able to cast spells or glamour, or grant wishes, or fly, but I could join in many aspects of their lives, and I fully intended to. I wanted to be a full partner to Thorn.

I think at one point I was genuinely useful. Yes, I was useful as a teacher, but I wanted more than that. I already knew I could teach.

Blessing, the goblin unicorn rider, evidently had feelings somewhat similar to my own about being part of the fae world. Goblins can't fly and are quite small and can't leap up into trees the way the fae can, or the way the non-flying but agile Elfe can for that matter. He lived at ground level but must have felt frustrated so, he decided he would learn to climb. Part of the problem was that most of the trees on the Edge are stately beeches, quite hard to climb because they don't have low branches. Blessing must have seen my rope ladder, but no, he was determined to make it without extraneous help. Then, of course, he got stuck. He had got so far, using a smaller shrub as a take-off point, and then, proud of his accomplishment, had gone further. He couldn't quite reach the next branch which had looked, he said later, so near. And he made the mistake of looking down, which for those of us who were not born to fly, was the worst thing he could have done.

It was fortunate that Starling was on his way back from tending to a unicorn with a stone lodged in a rear hoof. He - Starling, not the unicorn - heard Blessing's cries. The trouble was the tree the goblin had chosen was in a tightly knit group and Starling couldn't fly up to reach him. Wings are not always the answer in confined spaces. Starling had the sense to come to me, and I detached my rope ladder from our tree. I wasn't quite sure how to reattach it for Blessing but asked Mal, who is taller than me and a lot taller than any of the fae. Between us we were able to get the rope ladder in place and Mal could then get to a point where he could indulge in a spot of goblin rescue. We all then returned my ladder to Thorn's tree. Blessing was extremely grateful and also extremely embarrassed. He promised never to

try climbing again but also made us promise not to spread the story around. I'm afraid we weren't really able to keep it to ourselves because by the time we'd finished, we had quite an audience. However, a number of people thanked me, which was quite gratifying, since I hadn't actually done much.

"No, but you knew what to do," said Blessing, sniffing. And I suppose he was right.

He insisted on thanking me by giving me free tickets to the rides at the autumn equinox fair. I didn't really enjoy them that much on my own, but he was beaming when he saw me on a carousel unicorn, so I smiled and waved. I gathered Mal had accepted rides for the cubs.

School had started again and this year I was extra busy because I now had a role as a form tutor. Another set of names to learn and another lot of idiosyncrasies to deal with. Everything was going well, as far as schools ever go that well, and I was already planning a Christmas concert. Thorn would be back on the Edge at Christmas. Not before the solstice, and even then, it depended on winds and tides, but I wanted to make sure the concert took place before December 21st. The actual solstice varies from year to year, but I knew that was the earliest it could be. I had no intention of spending my boyfriend's return after a six-month absence in a frenzy of last-minute rehearsals.

To say I was looking forward to Christmas was an understatement. The fae celebrate the solstice and new year more than Christmas but the holidays are an important time for them, too. The children have their long break, mainly so that it doesn't matter if the weather is really bad. When it snows many fae hibernate. And yes, they go into a physical state of hibernation and conserve their energy. So, on the run up to winter they feast a lot, to get themselves ready. Obviously, occasionally, there's a year with very little snow, and then the kids just enjoy the break from lessons and of course the feasting. Whatever happens, the solstice fair in the last week of December is usually held with no problems. Really bleak weather rarely hits before January, so the solstice and new year are safe.

We had got into the habit of going to The Wizard on New Year's Eve, as we had the year we met. But Thorn and his friends made sure they were glamoured and then wore masks, like the humans. No more panic at midnight.

Chapter 8: Endings and beginnings

He got home at about midnight on Christmas Eve. The very first thing he did, naturally, was settle Blackberry in the meadow. But that was closely followed by greeting me. I'd been haunting the meadow, hoping, on the previous nights, too. But of course, he'd had to celebrate the actual solstice in Tara before travelling and then it takes time even for a fae on a unicorn to reach the coast, find a coracle, and then after the crossing, trek through Wales. He'd come as quickly as he could.

He grabbed me and actually carried me to our tree. Then he flew, still holding me, up into the branches. He'd never done that before and it was considered risky to fly in the woods, but he said he was in a hurry.

We made love, thrilled to be together again.

"Did you enjoy it?" I asked.

"What did you think?" came the reply, rather muffled in my hair.

I laughed. "I meant Tara," I said. "I know you enjoyed the sex we just had."

"Tara was interesting," he said. "I really think Blackberry enjoyed it more than me. But I had an enjoyable time. Rafferty and Purr looked after me." Those were the cat fairies who occasionally visited the Edge. Purr had even bonded with a unicorn and was one of the titania's permanent guard.

"Did you...?" I wasn't sure how to ask, or even whether I wanted to know.

"Did I what?" His voice was teasing. "Did I see much of Ireland? Yes. Did I attend any celebrations in the palace? Yes. Did I meet the titania? Yes."

"Did you meet anyone else?"

"Lots of fae, lots of leprechauns, lots of unicorns."

"Anyone special?"

"Oliver, my best friends there were Rafferty and Purr. I didn't socialise all that much with the rest. Obviously I was friendly with the team I was part of, but no, there was nobody special. Not until tonight. Not until you."

I hugged him even closer. He was back, and he was mine. I would never quite know if there had been anyone in Tara. Probably not. Fae don't lie. They say they can't but sometimes they twist the truth until they might as well be lying. I didn't think Thorn would do that to me and I knew he meant the bit about me being special.

We tidied ourselves and went down to eat with the others.

In a sense, this was my Christmas dinner. It was after midnight, so Christmas Day had started. Peasblossom and Amanita had prepared a welcome feast for Thorn, and it was magnificent. There was some kind of mushroom and sorrel concoction with homemade pasta, venison from a stag culled by Yarrow, a pudding with dried berries and honey, and a plate of cheese at the end. We drank mead and toasted each other well into the early hours. Normal for the fae, of course. For me, it meant an extremely late night indeed but then there was no school to worry about.

The goblin fair was still running and would be till just after the new year, so the next evening I enjoyed everything with Thorn. I told him about the tickets from Blessing and the reason for them and he laughed.

"Trust Blessing to want to be different," he said. "Ferdy never tries to climb. I was telling my colleagues in Tara about our mixed group and they were astounded. Very few of them interact with humans. They do have leprechauns underfoot, and there are cat fairies, of course. But humans, no."

"Are there goblins?" I hadn't heard him mention them.

"I don't think so," he said. "The palace servants make all the plans for celebrations, and I think some of them shop in human towns. There are no fairs like this one but there are wonderful dances and concerts. You'd enjoy those, but of course you'd never be allowed to hear them."

"I had a concert of my own," I said. "It went just as well as last year, maybe even better. Do the fae have composers as well as musicians or do they play human music?"

"There are composers," he told me. "I can get a copy of some of their music, I think. Rafferty is bound to have some in the library."

That was exciting. I would never dare play any of it in human hearing, but we could use it with my little fae orchestra. I now had a goblin, too. One of the goblin children who came to learn with Moth and me had shown a tendency to drum his fingers on the desk more than we appreciated, and I had managed to divert him into playing an actual drum with the group.

The next time Rafferty came he brought music. It was eerie but tuneful, something like Irish folk music played on horns and flutes. I was able to adapt it for our sessions and we all enjoyed it.

I was always amazed when I saw the cat fairies. The fae were strange enough to human eyes, but Rafferty and Purr had fur, with whorled markings, as well as all the usual fae accoutrements. Rafferty was a kind of tabby, and Purr was black, but the black had swirls in

it. Ferdy, with his fox fur, was similar, I suppose, but was so much a part of everyday life I'd ceased to marvel at him.

Life went on. It went on much better now that I had Thorn back in our tree. He had complimented me on the tree maintenance, and we had no leaks or thin patches to contend with.

There were various events of note, not least the arrival of the Portuguese refugees after the wildfires in their homeland. That gave Moth and me more students to teach. The Portuguese were surprised to find a human not only living on the Edge but teaching their young, but they accepted me graciously enough.

And then, a couple of years later, there was the wedding.

Harlequin and Yarrow had decided to get married. Columbine was a bit doubtful about the wisdom of this; she'd had to be rescued from an abusive marriage on the Isle of Man. But Harlequin and Yarrow had been living together for years and simply wanted a celebration.

I organised the music and we practised for nights and nights. It all had to be perfect. Harlequin had asked me to compose something special, and I had thought long and hard. Eventually I tried a blend of fae and human music. It was difficult but interesting to merge the two types and I hoped I succeeded. The group were pleased with what I'd written so that was hopeful. I'd borrowed a few instruments from school, thanking my lucky stars that we had quite an assortment and that nobody except me was likely to notice them missing for a night or two.

I found my group able and willing to play new instruments. Most of them were wind instruments and the basics were pretty common. I'd made it my latest project to learn the trumpet, so I was also trying something new. I'd tried wind instruments in the past, but they weren't my favourite. However, they worked best with the music I was providing.

French horns were my main choice for the wedding music. We had three now. There were a couple of trombones and oboes, and even a few cors anglais. And my trumpet, of course. Flutes and piccolos provided a sort of background thread.

We started the proceedings with an adapted and revised version of Mendelssohn's wedding march, rewritten for wind instruments, with added twists and twirls borrowed from Irish songs like the Londonderry Air. It was odd and started with some discordance then settled into a welcoming and gentle sound that lured everyone into the woodland setting. I hoped I'd done justice to Harlequin's request. Certainly, I knew Moth loved it.

When the ceremony was over, we played a rousing Sousa march, perfectly suited to our new skills. I watched the unicorns, all decorated with ribbons and flowers, prance back to their meadow to its strains.

Later, after the obligatory feasting, we played a selection of dance music, traditional and ultra-modern but consistently lively and apparently much appreciated. We agreed to continue all night provided people brought us drinks. Cobweb had come from Australia with his human husband Micky, so I had someone to compare notes with, but little time to chat.

It was a Saturday, so I didn't have to worry about my lack of sleep. I eventually caught a couple of hours, but Thorn didn't have much respect for my need for rest.

"That was all wonderful," he said.

"I can hear a 'but' in your voice," I told him.

"Yes, well..."

"What is it?" I was confused. I knew people had enjoyed the music and couldn't think what was wrong.

"I was just wondering..."

"Wondering what?" My own voice probably rose, showing my anxiety, and he grinned at me in the dawn light.

"It's just that I was thinking about us getting married some time, and what we could do about music."

I was speechless. Married to a fae? Then I realised he was seriously concerned about the music issue but took for granted that I would marry him. Well, I would, of course. It had just never occurred to me that he might ask.

"I could practise with the group and delegate the leadership to someone. I'm not sure who, but I could start considering it." I hoped my reply would make it clear I was willing.

Apparently, it did. It also ensured I could give up any idea of sleep. So, I ended up sleeping during the day, like my lover, though I got up early by his standards, hoping I would sleep again that night before school the next day.

And so, we planned our own wedding. It went well, and I found a good musical deputy among the refugees. Salgueiro even knew how to play the trumpet. I borrowed the instruments again and everything went smoothly. We danced at our wedding, and I got extraordinarily little sleep again.

Then later that summer we moved. All of us, fae, goblins, leprechauns, unicorns, and me too.

Yarrow had decided our main glade was becoming far too busy with tourists, dog walkers, mushroom hunters and various other kinds of human, most of them armed with cameras, at least on their phones. Shuddering slightly, we moved further into the woods.

The ancestral trees were initially seen as a problem but everyone was allotted the same kind of tree space they'd been used to, and most people brought bark or even branches to merge with the new trees. We carefully inserted the bark from 'our' tree into the new one and hoped it would meld and become part of its new home. We had brought our hammock and hooks, and some of the canopy and floor. And, of course, my ladder.

Thorn grumbled. "It's too far from the pub, from the station, from the car park," he said. But we knew Yarrow was right, and we would do almost anything to preserve our community. We just walked further and perhaps faster.

That winter we went to The Wizard at new year as usual. I wore my normal half mask. Thorn got Harlequin to bespell him then he dressed in a mock fairy costume with pointed ears, wings, and a mask made of some kind of fur. All these could be discarded at midnight and Thorn would appear human. Only I would know the real ears and wings beneath the glamour.

Rob met us, along with Peter, and a few of their other orchestral friends. I wished I could let them hear my 'fae' compositions but knew that would be a step too far. It was enough to know the fae liked them and that these human friends were still my friends.

We sang Auld Lang Syne with everyone else, linking arms and swaying to the traditional tune. I found myself thinking of a fae version. Something to occupy me in the spring, perhaps.

"I loved that," said Thorn, as we headed back to our tree. I had no idea where the others thought I lived but both the steady intake of alcohol and some fae blurring would have made them less than interested.

"So did I," I said.

"I love you, too," he added, "in case that wasn't obvious."

"I think it might have been obvious," I told him.

"And at least now we have a tree to go home to," he said. "No wandering around in the woods looking for each other and avoiding the others."

"Not that we've done that for some years," I pointed out.

"And we never will again," he said.

We reached the tree, and I knew he wouldn't sleep, just kiss me goodnight and go to get ready for the wild hunt. I wouldn't wave them off; I was too tired. Happy, but really sleepy.

"Happy new year," he said, kissing me gently.

"Happy new year," I said.

And it was.

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